

# CHINESE CULTURE AND RELIGION

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SINGAPORE BUDDHIST MISSION

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## CHINESE CULTURE AND RELIGION

At the outset I wish to make it clear that culture and religion are intertwined. Culture covers all aspects of our life whereas religion covers only the spiritual side. In other words, religion is just one aspect of culture, which is all embracing. The study of Chinese culture and religion unlocks one of the greatest treasure houses of about a quarter of the human race whose civilization has continued unbroken for several thousand years, during which there have been political disasters and natural disasters. Chinese stamina and vitality, inspite of the retrograde character of the Chinese bourgeois class, enabled the Chinese People to survive all these disasters through the centuries. The size of the country itself with many natural obstacles, which in other land such as Europe and elsewhere would have given rise to separate nations, have given the Chinese the opportunity to develop the character which they possess. But perhaps before we get to the subject proper let us try and get it straight in our minds what is meant by culture.

There are many people who talk rather loosely about culture without knowing its full meaning and implications and how culture has come about or developed. When a group of men, irrespective of time and place, meet the basic problems of environment they follow a common pattern of activity. This pattern is made up of such elements as social organisation, political institution, economic activities, law, science, art, religion and philosophy. When a group behave similarly and share the same institutions and ways of life, we say they have the same culture.

This is an important concept, and if we agree on this we are on common ground. Therefore in this sense, culture refers to all the traits of a people — not simply their achievement in one field or another. It follows, therefore, that all peoples have cultures, and the fundamental difference between peoples is the difference in culture.

Another important thing to remember about culture is that culture is not static. It is also not wholly isolated. It is true that a particular culture is influenced by the other cultures with which it comes



into contact or even by changes of its own environment. Anyone who studies the history of man will realise that it is the history of the contact and spread of cultures. Items of culture belonging to one people are constantly being adopted by another and in the process of time one often forgets that what one considers to be one's culture was in fact borrowed or adopted from another people.

Any culture that is in constant contact with other cultures and is prepared to accept or adopt items which are worthwhile adopting will be enriched thereby. It is in the nature of a growing thing to absorb nutriment, and the growth or enrichment of a culture can be compared to a growing tree absorbing nutriment from the soil. A culture that isolates itself and rejects nutriment from other cultures, will not grow, or may even die like any other growing thing without nutriment.

I have mentioned this important concept of culture because I want to show that Chinese cultural stability is due to the fact that Chinese culture possessed certain characteristics, among which is its ability

and readiness to absorb alien elements, with the result that, if you examine Chinese culture very closely and minutely, you find many elements that came from elsewhere, and yet unashamedly the Chinese call it Chinese culture. The so-called Chinese culture is all the richer for it.

### **CHINESE RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE**

Chinese religion or perhaps more important Chinese religious attitude or outlook is a product of Chinese culture. Rather than religion moulding Chinese culture, Chinese culture has moulded religion and this makes one of the most fascinating studies of Chinese life and behaviour. The Chinese had no religion worth talking about until the coming of Buddhism in the first century A.D. Before that, even long before Confucius and Laotse (referred to as founder of Taoism) there was what you might call folk religion which took the form of nature worship. The terrors and splendour of nature all seemed to be the work of some Power other than man. Man's intermingled feelings of wonder and admiration, of hope and fear, found expression in what we call religion. The Chinese worshipped nature

in order to be in harmony with nature, which the Chinese called Tao, and avoid calamity. This attitude towards the unknown is just one of the moulding forces of Chinese culture and therefore religion. This plus the philosophies of its great thinkers has moulded Chinese culture and given it certain characteristics, which in turn moulded or shaped Chinese religion.

The three chief characteristics of Chinese culture are: —

- (1) its absorbing power;
- (2) moral and intellectual and
- (3) practical wisdom.

I have pointed out earlier that a culture that is ready to absorb or adopt alien elements will be the richer for it. If Chinese culture had isolated itself it would have died after the many natural and political disasters in its history. The several conquests have enriched Chinese culture because the Chinese were prepared to adopt some of the items of culture from the conquerors. After contact with the West since the last 500 years,

inspite of all the insults the Chinese received from stronger western nations the Chinese were able to absorb items of western culture. If you take Chinese food today, you will be surprised with the alien items in a dinner which most people enjoy immensely thinking it is a truly Chinese dinner. Watermelons, cucumber, grapes, peppers, potatoes, tomatoes, cauliflower, cabbage, lettuce, tenderloin steak, all these were introduced into Chinese cuisine during the last few hundred years. But they have kept delightful company with traditional Chinese dishes and to all intents and purposes they appear on Chinese dinner tables as Chinese dishes. It is not uncommon to top off a Chinese dinner today with coffee, Sunkist oranges and ice cream, although I still prepare Chinese tea which has certain properties peculiarly suited to Chinese food. However, the introduction of food into this talk is merely to show that Chinese cooking being part of culture is all the richer with the introduction of these items from elsewhere. But if you take sunkist oranges from California, it is not so foreign to the Chinese as one would imagine. After all, Chinese oranges originally travelled to America from China, received their education in the Luther Bur-



bank School of California and returned with a new title.

Chinese religion also came about as a result of the absorbing power of Chinese culture. Spiritual and intellectual nourishment from any quarter, that was worth absorbing was always welcome. Buddhism came into China in the first century A.D. at a time when there was political chaos and people were looking for spiritual food or comfort which was not found in Confucianism and Taoism which were merely, up to that time, two philosophies. In other words the time was just right for a religion like Buddhism to come to the Chinese at the time and the Chinese readily absorbed it. Confucianism and Taoism had therefore to compete with Buddhism in order to survive and therefore had to adopt certain things from Buddhism in order to popularise themselves among the people. On the other hand, Buddhism being originally Indian and therefore foreign, had to adopt certain things from Confucianism and Taoism in order to make itself acceptable to the Chinese people. The result is today we loosely call the three — Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism — the three Chinese religions although in fact Confucianism and Taoism

were originally philosophies. However, Chinese religious life is all the richer and more interesting for it as you will soon see. Today, Buddhism is to all intents and purposes a Chinese religion.

The moral and intellectual side of Chinese culture is in striking contrast to western civilization. Chinese culture for a long time has been enclosed in an atmosphere of morals. Chinese thinkers see all things in their relation to man, to moral applications, to artistic or poetic sense or practical use. If you show something new to a westerner he will invariably say "that's interesting". A Chinese would ask "What is the use of it?". The wise see wisdom and the virtuous see virtue, so the saying goes. A different mental attitude produces different manifestations of interest. The use of a thing interests the Chinese more than the thing itself. Chinese, who were lukewarm to the citizenship issue in Malaya during the early days of Merdeka became enthusiastic about it once they understood the rights and privileges attached to it.

Chinese thought is centred upon the development of human relations. We are

interested in the natural laws only so far as they are capable of serving as guides to human conduct. Mental development is for personal culture which in turn will serve as the foundation of a well-ordered family life. The latter is the foundation of a well-governed State which in turn will serve as a step to international peace. World peace is not something to dream about but a practical moral scheme. National prosperity is invariably bound up with peace between nations.

Although Chinese culture was enclosed in an atmosphere of morals, the absorption of modern science and western education has made the modern Chinese penetrate the moral boundaries. There is no longer that instant moralisation of a natural law such as the law of gravitation, discovered by Newton because an apple dropped to the ground but which the Chinese moralised as "when a thing is ripe it must drop" or "when a person is old he must die", "why fuss over it?". The younger Chinese today are reaching further and further out adopting a critical attitude towards morals, government and social customs. On the other hand one must not forget that Chinese culture

built up through centuries of vicarious experience and generationse of continuous effort, by such means as the classics, literature in general, the graphic arts, music, the family, theatre, gods, temples and so on has produced a moral structure which has made the Chinese people trustworthy, their society stable and their civilization enduring. The moral emotional make-up of the Chinese has been endowed with such precepts as loyalty, honesty, love of parents, truthfulness, benevolence, righteousness, moderation and broadmindedness. I am sure intellectual honesty in the younger generation grown out of modern science will reinforce these virtues in the Chinese blood.

## **RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE**

The practical wisdom of Chinese culture is really another way of describing its absorbing power. To the Chinese, learning is for the sake of its use. This practical side of Chinese culture is most clearly seen in its attitude towards religion. When the Christian missionaries came to China preaching Christianity and brought with them many things to meet certain social needs, such as schools and hospitals, the Chinese



accepted them not because the Chinese believed in the Bible, but because the missionaries were kindly people and had brought things to meet certain social needs. Jesus Christ was even given a place in Chinese temples to be worshipped with other gods. To the Chinese there is no harm in having a conglomeration of gods in a place of worship. It is there if you believe it to be so; it is not there if you do not believe it. Here lies the Chinese toleration and practical wisdom in religion.

The three chief characteristics of Chinese culture which I have described have not come from nowhere or as a result of accident. The earlier moulding forces and the two philosophies of Confucius and Laotse have made what Chinese culture is today. Buddhism later on completed the spiritual side of things.

### **CONFUCIANISM**

Confucianism is not a religion in the same way as I would regard Christianity, Islam or Buddhism. In its pure form, Confucianism is a practical philosophy of human relationships and conduct. Discus-

sion of spirits is entirely out in Confucianism. When asked what spirits, Confucius said "respect them but have nothing to do with them". When asked about death, he said, "we do not yet understand life, how can we talk about death?". Even ancestral worship, which would appear to have something to do with spirits, is nothing more than an act of filial piety. We love our parents and we serve the dead as we do the living. Ancestral worship is a corollary of filial piety. One grows out of the other. Filial piety is the hub of Confucius' teachings. It centres around the idea that the individual body is the sacred inheritance from the parents and must always be regarded as such. How dare we act irreverently with this inheritance? Therefore to live carelessly is a sin against filial piety, so is disloyalty to the state, so is dishonesty in official duty, so is faithlessness to our friends, and so is lack of courage on the battlefield. Failure in any of these five duties will disgrace one's parents. In other words "Be a good son, a good brother, a good husband, a good friend and a good citizen". In fact this is the Confucian final test for any civilization. Educators might find it appropriate to apply this test to their educational

system and indeed to individual schools, i.e. whether they produce good sons, good brothers, good husbands, good friends and good citizens. In the modern context, I would add good daughters and good wives. Any educational system or school that can produce all these must be on the right path.

The whole basis of Chinese cultural stability is the Confucian concept of the Chinese family. The family system is so well organised as to make it impossible for a man to forget where his lineage belonged. This social immortality which is prized above all things has something of a character of a religion. But still Confucius is no religious teacher and that is why neither he nor any of his disciples has been made into a god and worshipped as such. Confucius has always been worshipped as the Model Teacher of Ten Thousand Generations.

### **TAOISM**

Taoism, before it became a religion after having borrowed heavily from Buddhism in order to survive, was a philosophy

of 'inaction' and laissez faire and has moulded the Chinese way of living and conduct of life in a very big way with the result that the Chinese today is a bit of everything — Confucianist, Taoist and Buddhist. As a philosophy, Taoism like Confucianism, aimed at the attainment of peace and contentment in an ordered society. Confucius approached the objective from the top i.e. from the ruling scholar class. Laotse approached it from the bottom of preaching contentment from below and non-interference by government in the lives of affairs of men. In the respect of good government, Confucius and Laotse were on common ground i.e. the best government is the least governed. People to be happy must live a life free from ambition and aggression according to Laotse's theory of "wu wei", after translated as inaction or effortless. According to him, all the troubles in the world are due to people striving for things which they cannot get. This theory has moulded Chinese thinking in any way to search for happiness in life. Follow the 'Tao' is therefore to model one-self as closely as possible without going against natural laws. Here the Chinese



thought is that the relationship between men and nature is reciprocal and to attain harmony with Nature is to attain spiritual satisfaction. It is said that if everyone lives according to this precept, naturally and simply, free from ambition and aggression, the world would witness a spontaneous good fellowship and brotherly love.

As a religion Taoism is entirely different from its philosophical aspect. It borrowed heavily from Buddhism and developed occultism, which includes such practices as the cultivation of supernatural powers by men, mediumship and traffic with supernatural beings, foretelling the future, astrology, prolongation of life, magic and the performance of miracles, alchemy and the search for immortality. Although both Confucianism and Taoism borrowed from Buddhism, Confucianism ended up without superstition or occult practices merely because Confucianism produced thinkers from time to time in its history, who attacked superstition and moralised occult practices. Taoism on the other hand produced no thinkers but only mystics, and therefore ended up overlaid with occultism and magic.

## BUDDHISM

Buddhism which came in the 1st century A.D. to do the finishing touches to Chinese way of life by offering spiritual food and comfort at a time when it was most needed by the Chinese and which could not be found in the Chinese way of life. It came to the rescue of the Chinese people when human reason failed. It is more popular than Taoism probably because it came as a religion whereas Taoism had to imitate Buddhism in order to be a religion. It is estimated that there are ten Buddhist temples to one Taoist, although strictly speaking there are no truly Chinese Buddhist temples. All Chinese Buddhist temples also house Taoist and Confucian gods.

Buddhism has truly conquered the Chinese people as a philosophy and as a religion. To the scholars it is a philosophy. To the common people it is a religion. Buddhism possess a logical method, a metaphysics and a theory of knowledge. The amount of Buddhist literature translated into Chinese during the first few centuries exer-

ted a great spiritual and scholastic influence on the Chinese mind, stimulated Chinese thinking and moulded Chinese conduct. The principal thought of Buddhism according to Chinese thinking is contained in just one phrase "the salvation of all living things".

Buddhist influence has been so great as to transform, not only stimulate, Chinese thinking which was originally Confucian. It has changed the tenor of Confucianism itself without converting the Confucian scholars. The average Chinese will often speak of the realisation of truth as an "awakening" in the Buddhist sense following a long meditation.

### **CHINESE MAXIM**

The most vivid and direct influence of Buddhism is its doctrine of transmigration. Because of this, it has immortalised ancestral worship and can be said to be complementary to Confucianism and that is why it always enjoys a prestige among Chinese scholars, which no other alien religion has been able to achieve. Because of its doctrine of transmigration you find Buddhism is most important in the Chinese heart

at the time of death, whereas Confusianism and Taoism in the scheme of things guided human conduct during one's lifetime.

Therefore in summing up, I would say that in Chinese culture, with emphasis on religion, the stress is to work peacefully, endure nobly and live happily. If Heaven is unattainable, then let us treat this mortal world as Heaven and make the best use of it for our happiness. To make the best use of their world for our happiness can only come about as a result of living a way of life we want without interference. There has therefore developed an art of living to bring about this state of happiness by the appreciation of nature and all the things around us. It is not just looking at things beautiful that counts. It is the proper time to look at them, the atmosphere in which to enjoy all these, the moods and so on. For instance blooming flowers are best enjoyed with butterflies flying around, hills must have springs or waterfalls, rocks must have moss, and to think you must have the moon and charming friends. When flowers wither, one should not attempt to look at them for they remind one of declining days. Similarly the waning moon is



like a withering flower. And so it is said to see beautiful women die in their youth. Chinese living is full of these maxim relating to love of life and carefree enjoyment. That is Chinese culture, and a typical Chinese steeped in all the good teachings of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism and who is a good son, a good brother, a good husband, a good friend and a good citizen will die happily and be buried dressed as a Confucianist, holding the writings of Laotse in one hand and the Buddhist sutras in the other. In our present Malaysian context, I would add that a good Malaysian Chinese should, in addition to dressing himself as a Confucianist and holding the Taoist writings and the Buddhist sutras in each hand, have his tombstone in the National Language.

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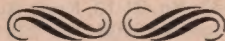
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